



# What is Your Event Saying About You?

A strategic guide and checklist for effective event branding

# About the Authors



Dave Baker, the managing director of BitterSweet Creative, is an expert in creative operations. He leads award-winning creative teams on projects spanning branding, events, web development, video production, and storytelling.



Obiekwe "Obi" Okolo is BitterSweet's creative director. With hands-on experience across design, marketing, art, and architecture, Obi brings a multidisciplinary perspective to every client engagement.

# Introduction

It's easy to think about events as logistics problems. Putting them together often involves answering a never-ending list of tactical questions:

What's our budget for a keynote speaker? How many chairs can we fit in a meeting room? When should we open registration?

As a host, it's hard to see past this reality. (You might even have recurring nightmares about the pros and cons of round vs. rectangular tables.) But here's the thing: if you're doing it right, your attendees won't notice any of it.

They will certainly notice when something goes wrong — getting stuck in a long registration line, getting lost in a conference center, or sitting through a program that runs twenty minutes too long. But in general, they're not thinking about your logistics. They're asking an entirely different set of questions:

*Am I having fun?*

*Am I learning something useful?*

*Is this worth the time I could be putting towards something else?*

The answers to these questions will stick with your attendees long after they return home, and will dramatically influence how they think about your organization, your work, and your brand.

Here's how our creative director, Obiekwe “Obi” Okolo, puts it:

*“Events are your organization's largest single brand expression. An event puts you in the same room with your most important people — donors, partners, community members, future supporters — and asks them to give you hours of their attention. Nothing else you do carries that kind of weight.”*

If your event is an extension of your brand, you must value strategy as highly as you do logistics.

First, you must think about the story you're telling with your event. Then, you must think about how that story translates into a visual identity to give your event a personality. Finally, you must leverage experience design to shape how your audience moves through the event and engages with the story you're telling.

An effective event brand starts with a single question before making any logistical decisions: What do we want our event to say about us?

Throughout this guide, we use “event branding” as an umbrella term encompassing the following elements:

## **Story:**

The narrative arc (*themes, big ideas, calls to action*) that serves as a framework for the event experience.

## **Identity:**

The design elements (*logos, colors, typography, imagery*) that you use to define and express the event.

## **Experience:**

How attendees physically move through the event (*program sequencing, wayfinding, sensory details*).

# Why Most Nonprofit Events Miss the Point

## The Logistics Trap

Here's a pattern we see often.

A nonprofit team spends six months planning its annual event. They negotiate with the venue, sign the catering contract, coordinate speaker travel, design the program, and rehearse the run-of-show.

The logistics go off without a hitch. But something is missing. The attendees are satisfied, but uninspired.

This is the logistics trap.

It's what happens when the operational demands of an event consume all available attention, and the hosts don't have enough time to give to their big-picture strategy. If they didn't have a dedicated creative partner, they likely didn't have bandwidth during the planning process to devote to branding or storytelling.

The logistics trap is understandable. Events are high-stakes and time-sensitive. There are real deadlines and real consequences when things go wrong. But organizations that treat events primarily as production problems tend to create events that feel like production solutions: professional and forgettable.

A mediocre attendee experience has a lasting effect.

*"Every event either builds or erodes your brand,"* explains Dave Baker, BitterSweet's managing director. *"When the people who matter most to your mission give you hours of their time and attention and leave without feeling anything meaningful, that's a long-term hit to your reputation."*



## Accidental Branding

Obi has a simple maxim he applies to his work as a creative director and designer.

*"There's no such thing as 'no design,'" he posits. "'No design' is a choice. 'No design' is simply bad design."*

The same is true when designing an experience: It's impossible to have an unbranded event. Every decision you make tells the audience something about who you are.

Nonprofits that ignore this fact often think that they are making a conscious decision to focus resources on "just the essentials." In reality, they are leaving their event brand up to chance.

The emails sent beforehand, the banner that welcomes attendees into the event space, the theme that organizes the speakers throughout the experience...

All of these elements leave a lasting impression, but too often, nonprofits miss the opportunity to shape what that impression is.

## Limited Perspectives

At BitterSweet Creative, we partner with organizations on every aspect of event branding, including naming and theming, storytelling, visual identities, and recommendations for in-person experiences.

While we are proud of the work we've completed for our clients, our most valuable contribution is often the simplest: an outside perspective.

When organizations run the same events, year after year, it's easy for them to fall into a rhythm. But rhythm too often contorts itself into repetition. The events look the same, feel the same, and achieve the same things. These experiences might marginally improve each time, but they rarely take massive leaps forward.

It's simply hard to know what's possible until you look at your event with a new set of eyes.

The best solution? A creative partner who knows your audience and event intimately and can pull in ideas and lessons from other industries and clients.



## Last Things First

When organizations come to our team for event branding support, they typically have a list of deliverables in mind: a logo, a color palette, some signage, and maybe a slide template.

Those are important, but they are outcomes, not a strategy. When events start with the outcomes, they produce “good enough” experiences without an x-factor. They make assumptions about their audience that don’t match reality. And they borrow ideas from other events without considering if they’re the right fit for their own organization.

Instead, we invite our clients to reconsider the order of operations. We start by asking questions about their audience, objectives, and work. We consider the details that the planning team hasn’t had time to sit with.

Only after the strategy is ironed out do we move to the list of deliverables. Strategy first, production second. Always.



# Story: Making Your Event Matter

When your attendees ask, “*Why am I here?*” you want them to have a quick answer. A strong story is how you provide them with that answer.

Event storytelling is the narrative layer underneath the in-person experience. It provides context that runs through your program, connects your speakers, and builds a sense of collective purpose among your audience.

This is where many organizations get stuck. Storytelling can feel abstract compared to the highly tactical event planning process. But it is some of the most practical and valuable work you can do in advance of your next event. Without a clear narrative, even the most visually polished, experientially smooth event will ring hollow.

Start with intention. Before you build an agenda, answer three questions:

- What do we want people to feel when they arrive?
- What do we want people to believe that they don't believe right now?
- What do we want people to do when they leave?

How you answer these questions will form a strategic brief for every decision that follows: what topics you choose, who gets time on stage, and what taglines and messages are shared in the physical space and promotional materials.

For nonprofits, this work carries extra weight.

*“Your event isn't only a brand expression,”* explains Obi. *“Think of it as a program of your nonprofit, just as visible and valuable as the other work you do each day.”*



Events can generate connections, deepen relationships, and move people closer to your mission. Nonprofit leaders who understand this treat storytelling as mission-critical rather than a nice-to-have.

To be clear, storytelling is not about scripting your audience's experience. The goal is to create the conditions where meaning can happen naturally. The best events we've worked on weren't the most produced ones. They were the ones where the story was clear and flexible enough for the audience to see themselves in it.

### Common Storytelling Pitfalls:

#### Top-Heavy Programming:

When the agenda reflects the organizational chart rather than the audience's needs, attendees feel they're being talked at rather than invited into a conversation.

#### The Data Dump:

Impact numbers are not a story. One story told with precision and care will do more for your relationships than a slide full of statistics. Let the story carry the data.

#### "So What?":

After they engage with a compelling story, people want to know what they can do about it. Without a clear purpose or call to action, events waste all that potential energy.

### Best Practices for Event Storytelling:

#### Start at the End:

Know what you want your audience to feel and believe before you build the program. Every session, speaker, and transition should lead to your intended destination.

#### Give It a Shape:

Events, like books or movies, have a beginning, middle, and end. Attendees should feel different at the close than they did at the opening.

#### Earn the Ask:

For nonprofits, especially, events often close with an invitation to donate or take a next step. That's most effective when the story has done its work first. The ask should feel like a natural conclusion to the narrative you're telling.

#### Get Feedback:

Don't guess what your audience thinks. After the event, ask them what actually landed. What did they remember? Explore the gap between what you intended to communicate and what people received.

# Identity: Giving Your Event a Personality

When people talk about event branding, they often mean the logo. But a logo is just one signal in a much larger system.

Visual identity includes everything your attendees see: the color palette and typography, the imagery, the environmental graphics in the space, the design of printed materials, the look of digital touchpoints like email templates and registration pages, the stage design, and the signage that guides people from one room to the next.

Every one of those elements is an opportunity to say something.

*“The strongest visual identities are built around a clear creative concept – a central idea that informs every design decision,”* notes Dave. *“A banner at the registration table and a graphic on the main stage should feel like they came from the same place.”*

Clients often ask us how closely the event identity should resemble their organizational identity. Our honest answer? It depends.

Some events, like flagship annual events and donor gatherings, benefit from close alignment with a parent brand. This conveys consistency and builds relational trust over time. The audience knows what to expect and keeps coming back.

Other events succeed when they diverge from the norm. A fancy gala, a happy hour at a local bar, or a morning brunch might all benefit from distinct visual identities. They present a complementary POV to the parent brand, rather than acting as an extension of it.

Whichever path you choose, your event brand should always be traceable back to your organizational brand, even when it's not identical. The values should be consistent. The voice should be familiar. The audience shouldn't feel like they accidentally ended up at someone else's event.



In *The Brand Gap*, a seminal book on strategy and design, Marty Neumeier outlines a vision for branding that mirrors the ways people change their appearance throughout the day:

*“In the morning you can wear a T-shirt, and in the evening a dress shirt. One moment you can be serious, and the next laugh out loud. Despite these apparent inconsistencies in your dress and demeanor, your friends and colleagues will still recognize you. What makes ‘you’ is deeper than appearances and moods.”*

In fact, Neumeier argues, brands that control their visual identities too tightly risk becoming inauthentic and unrelatable.

We encourage our clients to think of their event brands in a similar way. Stick to the foundation of who you are, but then embrace change and evolution in different contexts.

### Common Pitfalls for Visual Identity Development:

#### **Aesthetic Mismatch:**

This happens when an event’s design language doesn’t match the emotional experience. Think: a grassroots fundraiser presented like a black-tie gala.

#### **Copy-Paste:**

It’s natural to look at an event you admire and say, “I’ll have what they’re having.” But external inspiration should never replace your own strategic insight.

#### **Inconsistency:**

Sometimes attendees receive beautiful, personalized invitations, only to end up in a soulless, windowless conference room. Mismatched details signal that no one was thinking about the big picture.

### Best Practices for Visual Identity Development:

#### **Design for the Room:**

A lot of the design process happens on computer screens. But the audience will experience your event in-person. Invest in understanding your venue — how the light hits, where the doors are — to develop a cohesive, immersive identity.

#### **Find Your Place:**

Where is the event happening? Use local references and place-specific details to bring the identity to life. It shows that you’re paying attention and that your event was custom-made for your audience.

#### **Think Long-Term:**

If you’re hosting a recurring event, the visual identity should evolve (and ideally grow) each year. Invest in professional photography and video to capture the experience; those assets will help you promote the next edition.

# Experience: Being a Good Host

Experience design includes every physical and temporal detail: the flow of your event space, the moments between sessions, and the energy in the room at 2 pm on day two.

Unlike visual identity — which attendees encounter and then step back from — experience design is the aspect of your event brand that they are literally immersed in. A beautifully branded event can still feel disjointed if the experience hasn't been designed with the same care as the visual concept.

The attendee journey begins long before doors open. It starts the moment someone receives an invitation in their email inbox and ends when they complete your post-event survey.

Every touchpoint along that arc, including registration, wayfinding, meals, and social gatherings, is a brand decision.

In *Unreasonable Hospitality*, Will Guidara recounts lessons learned as the general manager of the legendary New York restaurant, Eleven Madison Park. He argues that investments in experiences are among the best any business can make.

*“While it may be impossible to quantify in financial terms the impact of making someone feel good, don’t think for a second that it doesn’t matter,”* he says. *“In fact, it matters more.”*

Think about the delightful moment when you walk into a coffee shop, and the barista remembers your order. It sticks with you, and it makes you want to come back. That’s experience design. As an event convener, you should strive to deliver the same level of hospitality.



Some events benefit from highly structured experiences with clear sequences, deliberate pacing, and carefully managed transitions. Other events are better served by creating conditions rather than choreography, providing a loose framework that gives attendees room to move, connect, and make the experience their own.

Whichever approach fits your event, the underlying principle is the same: your experience design should be chosen based on how you want people to feel, not what's easiest to produce.

### Common Pitfalls for Experience Design

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# The Event Brand

## Checklist

A tool from the team  
at BitterSweet Creative

Ready to find out what your event says about your organization? Use this checklist as a quick diagnostic. Pull it out early, before major production decisions are made, then return to it throughout planning to keep your strategy on track.

### Strategy

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- Do we know how this event connects to our organizational brand?
- Have we defined what we want attendees to feel, believe, and do?
- Do we know what our audience expects from this experience?
- Have we established clear, measurable goals that go beyond attendance numbers?
- Do we have a plan for collecting and using attendee feedback after the event?

### Story

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- Does our program have a clear beginning, middle, and end?
- Do our speakers and sessions connect to a shared narrative thread?
- Does our content lead with story before data?
- Is there a clear call to action that emerges naturally from the narrative arc?
- Will attendees be able to see themselves in the story we're telling?

### Identity

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- Does our event have a central creative concept?
- Is our visual identity consistent across every touchpoint?
- Does our design language match the emotional experience we want to create?
- Is the visual identity traceable back to our organizational brand?
- Have we considered how our visual identity will look and feel in the venue?

### Experience

Y N

- Have we mapped the full attendee journey, from invitation to follow-up?
- Have we visited the venue in person before finalizing decisions?
- Does our program sequence account for energy levels, attention, and pacing?
- Have we intentionally designed the liminal moments, transitions, and meals?
- Do our pre-event and post-event communications tell the same story?



Looking for a partner to help you design (or update) an event experience?

Contact our team at [info@bittersweetcreative.com](mailto:info@bittersweetcreative.com)  
or learn more about our work at [BitterSweetCreative.com](https://BitterSweetCreative.com)